

Step 3: Set Goals

Now you have some job and career ideas and learned about college options. What's the next step? Commit to your dreams. Start setting goals.

Goals are kind of like the North Star; they help guide you toward something you want to achieve. Setting and reaching goals helps focus your efforts, increase your motivation, and increase your self-esteem. When you are focused on a goal, you are less likely to be distracted by small or unimportant things. You might still take a detour, but at least you know where you're headed.

Setting SMART Goals

All goals are not created equal. SMART goals challenge you to focus on what's most important to achieve your dreams. They also help you track your progress and record your achievements. Not-so-SMART goals can be unclear, unrealistic, and difficult to reach. SMART goals are:

S

Specific and clear

For example, instead of saying, "My goal is to be a doctor," try, "I will earn an M.D. degree by my 30th birthday." Be specific about what you want to accomplish and when you plan to finish.

M

Measurable

With a SMART goal, you can set up milestones along the way to measure your progress. If your goal is simply to go to college, how will you track your progress? If you want a four-year bachelor's degree by age 24, your milestones could be taking geometry by 10th grade and earning a high school grade point average (GPA) of 3.33 or better.

A

Achievable and ambitious

Make sure your goals are reasonable too. If your goal is set too high, you might get discouraged and give up. If your goal isn't challenging enough, you could miss out on a sense of achievement when you reach the finish line. Decide what information or help you will need. What stands between you and your goal? Allow plenty of time to get information and overcome any challenges.

R

Relevant to you

It is easy to let other people set goals for you based on what they want. But goals set by others can be tough to reach because your heart isn't in it. SMART goals are important to you.

T

Tailored as you go

Your interests change as you grow older and gain experience. Goals that fit you now may not suit you later. Don't be afraid to get off track, make mistakes, or adjust your goals. Be determined and persistent as you go after your dreams, but don't feel obligated to follow a goal as your life and interests change.

No matter how hard you try to set a SMART goal and stick to it, you might discover that your goal is too easy, too hard, or just not right for you. If that happens, try to figure out why.

- ▶ Do you need to put in more effort?
Maybe you should take a break and refocus on your goal.
- ▶ Do you need more information?
If so, talk to a family member, friend, or counselor for help.
- ▶ Was your goal unrealistic?
Rethink your options and possible next steps.
- ▶ Did something beyond your control cause problems for you?
You might just need to try again.

Take time to evaluate your progress, adjust your goals, and celebrate your achievements.

